

The Monk Conundrum

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Summary: After a long and arduous journey including, but not limited to, talking trees, kidnapping, epidemics, thievery, and annoying mayors, our heroes are now faced with their most difficult challenge yet: getting a monk to talk.

***Chapter 1*: The Monk Conundrum**

The room was quiet. Too quiet. If it had been noisy, the problem at hand would not have been a problem at all. In fact, it would have been a solved problem. But as it stood, the only sounds were of the candles burning in the back of the room and the gears turning inside the heroes' minds.

Ivan sighed. "I give up. We've been here for two hours, and this monk hasn't said a word. Or even opened his eyes, for that matter."

"Are you sure we even need to visit this place, Isaac?" Mia asked. "Just because this temple is on the way to this evil forest doesn't mean there must be something here to help us get through it, right? I mean, a forest is a forest. People may call it evil, but that doesn't make it so."

Isaac leaned over and waved a hand in front of the monk, Nyunpa's, face. He didn't so much as flinch.

"Well," Isaac said definitively. "I'd rather not risk missing some kind of helpful doo-dad. I say we try to wake Nyunpa up. What have we tried already?"

"Talking to him, yelling at him, making one of his apprentices talk and yell at him, stealing the candles, threatening to burn down the temple..." Gareth tapped off each item on his fingers as he went. "Oh, yes. Mia tried asking politely."

"Saying 'please' and 'thank you' never hurt anyone," Mia replied defensively.

"It didn't help, either," Ivan said.

Garet threw up his hands exasperatedly, in so doing getting them caught in his hair. Scowling as he tried to wipe his fingers clean of hair gel, he said, "Who said we need Nyunpa's permission to get into the waterfall trial, anyway? Why don't we just knock the guy guarding it out of the way? We don't even have to touch him! If Move works on rocks and things, why can't it work on people?" Garet grinned. "He won't even know what hit `im!"

"Garet, that is an extremely irresponsible idea," Mia said. "We can't just go around using psynergy on people."

"Ooh, but it would make me feel so good!"

Isaac turned his head away from his feuding partners and watched Nyunpa. According to his apprentices, he hadn't eaten in days. Isaac could see it; the poor man was beginning to look like a skeleton, or a mummy.

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. This was as difficult a puzzle as any they'd faced so far. At least in Mercury Lighthouse, they had known there was a solution. Back then, it had only been a matter of which psynergy to use when.

Psynergy...

Isaac's eyes widened and he stood up in one jerky movement. "Wait! We're adepts!"

Ivan, Mia, and Garet shared a look and slowly rose to their feet. Isaac madly paced back and forth in front of the meditating monk, eyes glittering, but didn't say another word.

"Yes..." Garet prompted.

Isaac stopped pacing and pointed a finger at him. "Garet! How have we solved every puzzle we've been confronted with that we couldn't figure out?"

"We've blasted it with every type of psynergy we have until something worked." He paused and took a long look at Nyunpa. Slowly, Isaac's idea dawned on him. He folded his arms and grinned. "I see where this is going. Isaac, I like your style. Can I go first?"

"Wait a minute. Are you suggesting we use psynergy on Nyunpa?" Mia demanded.

"Good idea, Isaac," Ivan laughed, patting him on the shoulder.

"Isaac," Mia said, frustrated, with a dirty look at Ivan. "This is not a good idea!"

"Sure it is. Don't rain on our parade," Garet told Mia, then turned to Isaac. "I really, really want to go first. Please?"

"No!" Mia protested.

"Look, Mia," Ivan said. "You yourself said back in Mercury Lighthouse that if you can't solve it physically, blast it with psynergy. It's a basic rule of being an adept."

Mia hesitated. "I did, didn't I." She shook her head vehemently. "But I was talking about a statue, not a monk!"

"Same thing." Garet rubbed his hands together. "Can I *please* go first, Isaac? Just one little fireball?"

"Come on, Mia," Isaac said, ignoring Garet altogether. "We won't do anything that'll hurt him, and even if we do by

accident, you've got Ply and I have Cure. Everything will be just fine." He nodded to Gareth. "When you're ready."

"You're suggesting torture, you know," Mia said sourly.
"Using psynergy on people. Not even Saturos, Menardi, and Felix do that."

"Well, what about Mind Read? You're not opposed to that. We use that on people," Gareth challenged.

"We do that all the time," Ivan offered. "Besides, what else are we supposed to use it on? Rocks?"

"We used it on a tree once," Isaac pointed out.

"Focus, please," Mia said. "Listen. It's not the same thing." She ran a hand through her hair. "Mind Read is an invasion of privacy, and not physically painful. Nyunpa would notice if Gareth set him on fire. People we use Mind Read on never even notice we're doing it."

"Oh, they notice," Ivan muttered, half to himself. "Most of the time, I don't get any useful information because they're wondering why I'm staring at them."

"Look, Mia. I promise we won't use any psynergy we would use in battle. No eruptions, no earthquakes. How about this: we'll limit what we use to Move, Douse, Whirlwind, Growth, and, um, Catch. If he doesn't say something by then, we'll just head into the forest, temple or no."

"Either that, or force the sucker in front of the waterfall out of the way," Gareth mumbled.

Mia bit her lip, hesitating. At last, she said, "Alright. But only those five."

"Wait, wait, wait," Gareth protested. "None of those psynergies are mine, except for Move, and that's boring! You can't cut me out of the first fun thing we've gotten to do since leaving Vale!"

"Garet, you're a Mars Adept," Ivan said. "Your psynergies hardly fit Mia's 'nice' standards."

"But I want to toss some psynergy at the monk!"

"I'll give you the Catch Beads," Isaac promised. "But only for now; they're a farewell present from my mom."

"What could I possibly do with Catch?" Gareth demanded.

"Pull his hair," Isaac suggested. "For a monk, he has plenty of it."

"His hair isn't all that great," Gareth muttered under his breath. Out loud, he said, "All right, I guess."

"That would hurt him, wouldn't it? Pulling on his hair, I mean," Ivan pointed out. Mia smiled gratefully at him.

"Steal his money pouch, then. You could always give it back later."

"Fine, fine." Gareth sighed dramatically. "But if this doesn't work, can I at least set a tree on fire on our way out?"

"Only if I get to Douse it before anything burns," Mia retorted.

"Okay, now that that's settled, I'll go first," Isaac said, turning to face Nyunpa and planting his feet.

"Hold it!" Gareth grabbed hold of Isaac's shoulders and wrenched him backward. "I'll go first! I claimed it!"

"Fine." Isaac dug into his pack and handed over the green Catch Beads. "I don't want to argue anymore. I want these back, alright? They're-"

"A present from Dora, I know, I was there when you got them." Gareth slipped the beads onto his wrist. "Okay, I've got it."

Garet stepped forward, almost pushing right into Isaac in the process. Reaching into his subconscious, he found the new psynergetic energies provided by the Catch Beads on his wrist. Concentrating until his head hurt, he pulled those energies to the front of his mind. Pinning them there, almost trembling with the effort, he latched on to the small money pouch at Nyunpa's belt. Blue waves passed up from his feet to the top of his head. The white psynergy glove appeared in midair, and its fingers closed around the little, brown pouch. The hand shrank as it rapidly ran into Gareth, depositing the money pouch and something more into his true hand. The blue psynergy waves dispersed and he released the Catch energies back into his subconscious. As always when he used psynergy, he felt a little light-headed after it was all over.

Garet held up the money pouch triumphantly, but stopped, confused, as he saw what it was attached to. Taking it in both hands, he showed it to his comrades. "Isn't this his belt?"

Isaac laughed loudly. "I guess Catch couldn't actually take the pouch off his belt, so it just took the whole thing!"

"Which means it was ripped clean off." Mia crossed to Gareth and held up the ends where the cloth was ripped and frayed. "That had to have hurt."

"Well, too late, now." Gareth slipped the money pouch off and handed the belt to Mia. "Hold this while I find out how much he's got on him."

"You're despicable," Mia said, an undercurrent of anger threatening to take over her voice.

Garet stuck his tongue out at the Mercury Adept and pulled open the drawstrings on the pouch. He put it up to his face so as to see better inside... and sneezed.

He wrinkled his nose in disgust and roughly pushed the pouch at Mia. "It's full of herbs! Not even your pack smells that bad!"

"You say it smells bad now, but wait till my medicines save your life one day," she retorted.

"I don't see why you even bother taking all of that with you everywhere. You're an Adept, aren't you? You sure aren't any good in battle, so you must be a good healer."

Mia bristled. "Oh? Do you want to have a duel right here, so I can show you what good I can do in battle?"

"Guys," Ivan whined.

"Focus, guys, remember the task at hand." Isaac held out his hand. "Garet, the Catch Beads, please."

"Oh, the monk! Did he react at all?" Ivan squatted down in front of the now beltless Nyunpa. He shook his head. "Nope, no response. Catch didn't work. What's next?"

"Move," Isaac said. Ivan scrambled out of the way and wedged himself in between Gareth and Mia, who were still fuming silently in each other's general direction.

Isaac shuffled his feet. "I didn't mean that you need to move, Ivan. I meant, Move, as in the psynergy, not move as in a command."

Ivan shrugged. "Oh."

Isaac positioned himself directly in front of Nyunpa and used Move. Nyunpa flew several feet to the left, but he didn't respond.

"Look how his mat is all scrunched up under one leg," Ivan said. "That can't be comfortable, but he hasn't even twitched!" He hesitated. "Are we sure he's alive?"

"Here." Mia handed the belt and pouch to Ivan and straightened Nyunpa's mat so it wasn't scrunched up underneath him anymore. Still, the monk didn't say a word.

"I never knew anyone could be so stubborn," Gareth said loudly, earning a brief glance from each of his friends. "What?"

"Alright, so we've tried Catch and Move, and they didn't work. What's next?" Isaac asked.

"How about Douse?" Ivan suggested.

"No way. Not until we've tried everything else," Mia said.

"Getting wet won't hurt him."

"But he will get wet, and we have no real way to dry him off."

"I do," Gareth said.

"What if we had Ivan cast Whirlwind after you use Douse, Mia?" Isaac suggested. "It won't get him entirely dry, but it'll

be something, at least."

"Alright, fine." Mia took her turn standing in front of Nyunpa with a sour look at her companions.

"I'll bet she's thinking that she should never have left Imil to follow us," Gareth whispered to Ivan.

"Want to find out?" Ivan whispered back.

"I need silence, please," Mia said exasperatedly. She concentrated, pulling out her Douse psynergy and raining a few drops on Nyunpa's head. Releasing it, she said, "Nope, didn't work. Your turn, Ivan."

"Of course that didn't work, you hardly even touched him! Blast him with it, Mia, just like you did that statue in the lighthouse!" Gareth punched the air excitedly.

She sighed, but she was quite done arguing with the boys. Raising her hands into the air, she poured water on the monk's head as if the heavens had collected all the water in the world and unleashed it inside this small room.

"I think that's good, Mia," Gareth said, backing away from the growing puddle around Nyunpa.

Mia thrust her arms down, releasing her psynergy and folding her arms. "There. It didn't work. Ivan, you're up."

"We're down to two psynergies. This had better work," Isaac said, nodding to Ivan.

The Jupiter Adept walked up to Nyunpa and found his Whirlwind psynergy. The resulting twister splattered water droplets away and whipped his hair about, leaving him mostly dry and the Adepts dripping wet.

"Good idea, Isaac. Great idea. Let's have Ivan use Whirlwind after Mia casts Douse. Perfect." Gareth peeled his soaked shirt away from his chest, wincing.

"Sorry, everyone," Ivan mumbled.

"It's Isaac's fault, not yours."

"Thanks, Gareth," Isaac said. "We're down to Growth now, I guess. If this doesn't work, it's off to the evil forest with no preparation or words of advice."

"We could always ask those apprentices for advice. They've been around here for a while, they're bound to know something," Mia suggested.

"Alright, that'll be Plan B. First, Gareth, give me a Mars Djinni."

Gareth frowned and folded his arms. "No way. You give me one of your Venus Djinn, and I'll cast Growth."

"What are they arguing about now?" Mia whispered to Ivan as the Vale boys went at it.

"That's right, you haven't been around when we needed to use Growth, have you?" Ivan smiled. "This happens every time. For a Venus or Mars Adept to obtain Growth psynergy, they have to set a djinni from the other element. They argue like this every time."

"I would, too. I like my djinn too much to pass them around all the time."

"Isaac usually wins, since Growth is more like an earth psynergy," Ivan supplied.

"Thanks, Ivan, for clearing that up."

"No problem."

"Okay, fine!" Gareth yelled, taking a djinni off his shoulder and passing it to Isaac. "But only long enough to cast Growth. I want him back."

"Yeah, I know." Isaac set the djinn on his own shoulder and turned back to Nyunpa. "Okay, Nyunpa. Last shot."

The Mars Djinni glowed as Isaac cast Growth. The blue waves encircled him as vines crept up from the floor and grasped Nyunpa's arms.

Ivan's brow wrinkled. "Huh. I always thought that Growth needed an existing plant or seed. My mistake."

"It does." Isaac pinched off the psynergy flow and handed Gareth's Mars Djinni back. "Remember all those herbs Nyunpa had in his pouch? Bits of them were all over the floor."

"That doesn't make any sense," Mia said.

"Oh, well. Let's just see if it worked."

The four Adepts crowded down around Nyunpa, looking at him expectantly. He was damp, he was off his mat, he had vines growing about his arms, and his hair was a mess from Whirlwind, but he said not a word.

Isaac sighed. "That's that, then. I guess we're going to Mia's Plan B."

Ivan thumbed his own chin. "You know, I wonder if he's actually conscious."

"If he were conscious, he would have reacted by now," Gareth said. "Let's go."

"But if he were, he would have been listening to us talk, argue, yell, and threaten, and would probably be kind of irritated at all the psynergy we've thrown at him. I wonder what he's thinking?"

"Nothing, I'll bet. Come on, I'm ready to attack this forest."

"I hope you don't mean that literally," Mia said.

Garet grinned. "Of course not, Mia."

As the others turned to go, Ivan reached into his subconscious and took hold of his Mind Read psynergy. Directing it at Nyunpa, his mind filled with another's thoughts.

Ivan gasped.

"What's up, Ivan?" Isaac asked, turning around in the doorway.

He shook his head. "I never knew a monk would even know such dirty words, much less use them like *that*."

"If you don't mind, I'd like these vines removed from my arms so I can stand up and talk to you all properly," Nyunpa growled. "I have half a mind to just send you into the forest with Force and be done with it."

"He *is* alive!" Gareth gasped.

Nyunpa put two fingers to his forehead and shook his head in disgust.